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SUBJECT: THE NAPLES GARBAGE CRISIS: A CASE STUDY IN SOUTHERN ITALIAN  
PARALYSIS, WITH SOME SIGNS OF HOPE

REF: NAPLES 57

Sensitive but unclassified - handle accordingly.

1. (SBU) Summary: Although the accumulation of garbage in Italy's Campania region has declined significantly since it grew to crisis proportions earlier this year, continued national and even international press coverage have made it a symbol of everything that is wrong with the Italian South: ineffective public services, failed leadership, lack of civic responsibility, and entrenched organized crime. While politicians continue to argue and blame each other, Naples Prefect Pansa, the government's Waste Commissioner, has identified new dump sites and landfills that, when opened, should bring relief. An incinerator in Acerra should begin operating in 2008, and will also contribute to a solution. A U.S. Navy assessment of health risks to its personnel in the region is being undertaken, and will examine how long-term contamination may have affected the air, water and soil quality (note: close hold). Post will continue to monitor the situation closely as our warden message on potential health hazards expires December 31. End summary.

2. (U) While the waste emergency in Campania is not as severe as it was several months ago (reftel), it has not yet been resolved. Trash goes uncollected for days and sometimes weeks in some parts of Naples and outlying suburbs and towns. As landfill space has become scarcer, some 300 to 500 metric tons of waste have accumulated in Naples Province alone, according to media reports. One report indicated that, were the garbage bales to be piled end to end, they would stretch from Naples to Scotland, while another predicted it would take fifty years to incinerate just the current accumulation. Regarding the separate issue of sewage treatment, one former Naples academic who now lives in the U.S. told the CG it is sheer luck that the city has not had a cholera epidemic in years.

3. (U) On November 13, Pol-Econoff and Econ specialist toured some of the affected areas. Particularly hard-hit by the crisis is suburban Pozzuoli, just west of Naples, where garbage piles stretch as long as 200 meters. At one site, Roma children picked through a five-foot high heap; at another, smoke billowed from a massive pile -- despite a huge sign announcing "dumping prohibited." Other areas choked with refuse include the Naples neighborhoods of Fuorigrotta and Bagnoli (near the NATO base), and several roads running on the ocean side of Mt. Vesuvius not far from the archaeological site of Herculaneum. Interestingly, there are no piles of uncollected trash in most tourist areas, in the Chiaia neighborhood where the American Consulate is located, or in Posillipo, the upscale neighborhood where Regional President Bassolino lives.

4. (SBU) Residents of some of the worst affected areas have

staged several demonstrations over the past few weeks, some to protest that the garbage has not been collected, and some to object to the possible establishment of new dumps in their towns. As foreshadowed in reftel, a number of local mayors have opposed new dumps. Following increasing media attention, on November 7, Prime Minister Prodi called several local authorities to Rome to try to broker an agreement. The next day, Naples mayor Rosa Iervolino privately expressed her frustration to the CG, noting that both politics and geography were hindering a solution. Naples does not have much open space nearby, she said, "and I can't dump the garbage into the sea!" Later on November 8, a site near a cemetery in the city's Poggioreale district was selected as a new city dump. Yet although Iervolino acknowledged that the northern Italian city of Brescia successfully converted trash into energy, there is apparently no imminent plan to copy this model in Naples.

15. (SBU) In July, Prodi appointed Naples prefect Alessandro Pansa to be the new Commissioner for the Waste Emergency, replacing Guido Bertolaso, who continues in his role as national Director of Civil Protection. A member of Pansa's team (a nuclear waste specialist from Italy's Geological Survey) told us November 15 that he is optimistic the waste problem will be over soon, though this view is not widely shared by all observers. Two new major landfills in Caserta and Avellino (the former "a done deal," the latter strongly expected) should mean an end to the space problem, he said. In addition, a modern incinerator, designed to convert non-toxic waste into energy, should be completed in Acerra in 2008. Many of the bales of waste that have been through processing plants and stored temporarily around the region will be deposited into some of Campania's caves, and in some instances covered with cement.

16. (U) Naples' recycling program (established two or three years ago) is not working well. Most politicians with whom we have discussed the issue bemoan the fact that Italians, in particular

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Southern Italians, do not share the discipline and civic responsibility of their northern European counterparts. However, even those who do attempt to recycle may be doing so in vain, according to the waste expert. Glass, cardboard and metal, which are in demand, get recycled, but the paper and plastic that many Neapolitans work to separate often get mixed back in with the rest of the garbage because recycling them is not economically viable. Mayor Iervolino asked the CG for possible U.S. interlocutors experienced in large-scale recycling. As part of the Mission's "green" initiative, the Consulate General recycles paper, plastic and toner.

17. (U) As for dealing with the "not-in-my-backyard" syndrome, our contact told us that Pansa's role as Commissioner gives him the authority (and funding) to issue and enforce decrees. On November 16, Naples media reported that Pansa had warned local authorities that if they do not accept their responsibility to deal with the waste problem, a solution would be forced on them. Indeed, politics seems to be a greater obstacle to resolving the problem than geographical or other factors, and reflects a broader leadership paralysis that extends well beyond the garbage crisis. Pansa's term as Commissioner expires on December 31; he will be replaced by Regional President Bassolino, who has already served as Waste Commissioner, and who is under indictment for fraud relating to cost and time over-runs on the incinerator project.

18. (U) The situation is further complicated by finger-pointing by various political leaders, and ongoing, unsubstantiated rumors that somehow organized crime is behind the waste crisis. Our contact in Pansa's office reported that he has not seen evidence of Camorra involvement, although he had noticed some "suspicious" people observing the unloading of waste at various dump sites. Organized crime's links to illegal toxic waste dumps in the region have been described in annual reports by leading Italian environmental group Legambiente, as well as in the recently published best-seller mafia expose "Gomorra." A major Camorra boss told judges a few years ago that toxic waste

"is like gold" -- one of the most lucrative and less risky activities for the Camorra. Half of the industrial waste produced in Italy each year falls into the hands of organized crime groups who dispose of it illegally for record profits, according to Legambiente's most recent study.

¶9. (SBU) The U.S. Commander of Navy Region Europe has commissioned an assessment, being conducted by Navy experts with the collaboration of host-country officials, of the health risks of waste and pollution in the area. (NOTE: This assessment is sensitive and has not yet been made public, though both the GOI and local authorities are on board -- please hold close. End note.) Though prompted by this year's garbage crisis, its focus will be much larger, and the team will look at the effects of waste on the quality of soil, water and food throughout the region. According to members of the assessment team, initial indications are that the garbage burning, while unpleasant and possibly dangerous in certain areas, is not likely to be a serious general health risk. (An ongoing GOI study should shed more light on this.) A potentially more serious concern is the effect of decades of improper hazardous waste disposal in Campania. (The results of a GOI study were presented at an international conference in September, and should be published soon.) The key question regarding both trash burning and buried waste is if there is an overlap between specific local areas of concern and where Navy employees live or work, something the assessment team will be focusing on using geospatial data.

COMMENT

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¶10. (SBU) Despite high-profile media attention (newspapers continue to call it a "crisis" and an "emergency"), the waste situation has improved significantly since the summer, and further progress appears to be in sight, despite the characteristically inefficient bureaucracy and the tendency of both politicians and the public to complain rather than to offer solutions. Most city districts are not overflowing with burning rubbish, as was the case several months ago. The Department's warden message, issued earlier this year in response to the more urgent situation, expires on December 31. Post will continue to monitor the situation, and will coordinate closely with local authorities (both health and political) and U.S. military personnel before making any final recommendation.

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